



# Behaviourism: operant conditioning

You are learning how to...	In the context of...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyse behaviour using psychological concepts</li> <li>Apply psychological approaches to produce explanations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operant conditioning</li> <li>Gender development</li> </ul>

Operant conditioning is a learning theory that says that organisms, including humans, learn from the **consequences** of their behaviour. Some consequences make the behaviour that produced them more likely to happen again in future. This type of consequence is called **reinforcement**. Other consequences make the behaviour that led to them less likely to happen again in future. This type of consequence is called **punishment**.

At school pupils are given merits or yellow slips for excellent or substandard work respectively. Explain how this system is designed to promote good work.

Nisha is a primary school teacher. All the children in her class are well behaved except Nicholas. He always seems to be talking when he should be listening and spends much of his day doing things that distract, upset or annoy the children around him. Nisha makes sure she watches him carefully all the time and she tells him off every time she catches him being naughty. But his behaviour seems to be getting worse, not better. Why is Nisha's punishment not having the effect it should have?

Jasdeep has broken a window playing football in the living room. He is very anxious about what his parents will say when they find out. When his mother comes home and demands to know what has happened, Jasdeep has a stroke of inspiration and tells her that his little brother Sukhdeep was responsible. His mother goes off to find Sukhdeep and Jasdeep heaves a big sigh of relief. How might this incident shape Jasdeep's future behaviour and why?

## Operant conditioning and gender

Behaviourists believe that gender differences are sets of learned behaviours that children gradually acquire through operant conditioning. Use the concepts of operant conditioning to explain how the following situations might influence the gender development of the children described.

Tom is three years old. He has always played together with his older sister, Michaela at home, but today is his first day at playgroup. After initially clinging to his dad, who has brought him along, Tom is attracted by some of the toys he sees. He wanders over and picks up a brightly dressed doll and starts playing. Some of the other boys notice and start pointing and laughing at him, saying that dolls are for girls. Tom is upset and puts the doll down.

Tom and Michaela have been watching a TV programme about ballroom dancing. Afterwards they play dressing up. Michaela chooses a blue dress for herself and a pink dress for Tom. They whirl around the room like the dancers on the TV. When their dad comes in he laughs. He says to Michaela, 'don't you look pretty?' To Tom he says, 'shouldn't you be wearing a suit?'